

Optional Terms

Elizabeth Foulke

I am Elizabeth and I am alone.

Alone (adj, adv, and n): 1a. (adj) Being on one's own; by one's self; having no other present, unaccompanied.

Alone, formed by compounding the Old English *ael* (all) with the Old English *aan* (one). When separated into each of its roots, the word conveys balance: three vowels, three consonants. An equation: all = one; one = all. All of us ones. To be at one with all.

All a. (adj) from Old English by way of German: with singular noun.

1. The whole amount, quantity, extent, or compass of; the whole of.

All—the whole of—wants for nothing. Consider the homophone, hole, and the sense of fullness remains. In the mind's eye a hole is shaped like a circle. The edge that defines a hole returns to its origin thereby encircling emptiness and transforming it to substance. What was blank and unnoticed becomes quantifiable. All is our arms and soul outstretched to reel everything in: stars and neon and mites and mist; icicles and nieces; pupae and sludge; the neighbor with the car papered in paranoid propaganda; wasps and spatters of oil; pencil shavings and cobwebs. All is indiscriminate.

All has its own homophone: awl, an elegant tool that punctures circular holes into leather. All, awl, hole, whole.

Like ohm, all is a one-syllabled mantra that reminds us aloneness is not lack; it is overflow. *All, all, all.*

One a. (adj, n, and pron) also from the Old English, by way of German: 1. designating a person who, or thing which consists of a single individual or unit, without the addition of another of the same kind.

This definition points to the math of one—without the addition of. And it alludes to science too—of the same kind. Start adding different kinds and the one is still one even if it is surrounded by two, or three, or ten, or thousands. One person in a forest among thousands of trees is still one. “Of the same kind” is an ambiguous phrasing. Depending on how we define the same kind, one person in the presence of another or many might still be “without the addition of.”

Written out numerically, 1 stands with confidence—a straight line. Sometimes it's given a base and a little beak. But it never slouches. We know a one when we see it by its vertical prowess. Depending on the writer's penmanship or the font they choose, a 1 and an I may be identical. The Romans used the symbol I to denote the number one. It represented the pointer finger, the digit that started off a count with one. The same finger that orients or emphasizes. And when the English language adopted this symbol, the first person singular and the number one evolved into a direct match. Our position and perspective are predicated on the notion that we are but one. I am all-one. 1 is all-one.

One is a balanced word. Like “all” it is a mere three letters. The vowels on either side of the “n” anchor the consonant. Here the “o” plays a trick as it turns into a “w.” The homophones persist. I feel as though I have won something once I realize and accept that marriage and/or partnership are not prerequisites for the adult human woman. Someone placed a blue ribbon in front of me. But it was also hard won.

As a child and teen, fairy tales, Disney movies, and Meg Ryan rom-coms schooled me in romantic partnerships. The oldies station played, *I will follow him... wherever he may go / there isn't an ocean so deep / a mountain so high it can keep me away....I love him, I love him, I love him / and where he goes I'll follow, I'll follow, I'll follow.* The pop songs declared that they, whoever they were, *could never tear us apart* and professed, *I want to dive into your ocean / is it raining with you?* I sang along with all of these songs, first because I liked the tunes and then because I liked what the lyrics conjured: magnetism for another person that quashed any pretense of control. Did a young me ever question the equation: romance = an overwhelming sense of aliveness? I'd like to think I did, but truthfully I was drawn to the relationships the songs portrayed. Nothing but romantic love could elicit such emotion from the voices coming through the stereo speakers. I would have it for myself one day. When I looked and listened, what I noticed and what held much of my interest were the stories of coupling. I didn't question that this was something to aspire to any more than I understood that one day I would drive my own car or move out of my parents' house.

Over the years I internalized a message—that alone was something other than all-one. Rather than all, one was merely a part. A part that needed another one to be whole. I was in my thirties by the time I questioned the validity of this belief. Or it took until then for me to be able to hear the frequencies that might have been there all along.

At one time I felt embarrassed to reveal that there was no significant other in my life. That I was alone and lived alone. No more; if anything it's the opposite. I proclaim, "I live alone" and my partnered friends respond wistfully, "I remember what that was like."

My shame in my aloneness has dissipated, yet I've come to view alone as an inaccurate way to explain or inhabit my identity. Hermits might be the only ones who have a right to claim it. The rest of us, even those with few ties to family or those without friends, are not as the definition states, without the presence of others. Our physical selves share space with coworkers and shoppers at the grocery store. We might have moments or long stretches of aloneness but, as an absolute, aloneness is so rare, maybe even impossible. So we use the word to represent moments in our life and we link it to a feeling.

Aloneness can go hand and hand with loneliness, but it doesn't always. For many of us who share meals and laughter with colleagues, spend afternoons at the museum with our mothers, talk or video chat with friends and siblings, attend church or 12-step programs, and know the waiter at our breakfast place, alone falls short as a descriptor. We inhabit a physical space and emotional space with others. Though I love the multiple ways in which the word connotes completeness, I search for another term to explain myself to these others and to myself.

Single (adj) 1. from the Latin *singulum*; (in classic Latin only plural *singulī*) sole, unaccompanied, individual; separate.

The string of beautifully beaded adjectives in the definition of single complement one another to create an idea. An idea of what or who or how many.

1. In predicative use: Unaccompanied or unsupported by others; alone, solitary.

In predicative use: The woman is single. The modifier is linked to the predicate, not the subject. While its relationship to the verb "to be" in effect describes the subject, in this usage, singleness is a state of being. States can be temporary. States can relate to something physical or something internal. Sleepiness or hunger, pain or calmness. Sometimes we can take action to control or modify these states: sleep, eat, swallow an analgesic, breathe deeply, turn our gaze to the leafy branches outside the window, pet the cat.

Single—to be leaned into or scuttered out of? As a state, which state does it map onto most synchronously? Desire or terror?

The terror of being single is both a figment and reality. Some worry that to be denied romantic companionship is to miss out on something that feels or is necessary for their well-being. Others fear the judgment that could come if we remain single for too long. It is not the state itself that scares us, but the response it elicits from our peers.

Desire.

It came after I said no. I looked down into the eyes of a man I once loved, as he remained kneeling on a footpath along the Pacific, waiting for my response. “I can’t say yes.” Because at first, I couldn’t say no. So he asked again and the second time I knew the only passage out was “No.”

The “no” marched in and rearranged my inner and outer lives. It bestowed me with a license to make decisions without mulling over whether or not they were selfish. No released me from the push and pull of whether or not it was the good and right thing to compromise.

Sacrifice and love overlap. But sometimes giving and denying sidle toward resentment, remorse. We’re left disgusted with what faces us when we stare into the mirror. Exhibit A: I slowly turned my back on the music and friends and places that I loved in order to remain with a man. Exhibit B: I stayed in something with someone whom I soon found boring, who couldn’t talk to me about books or the news or ecosystems, or the incomprehensible vastness of the universe and whether or not there was a loving or uninvolved being that was part of it all. Exhibit C: I know that “no” is the only response that leads to a self that I like to be.

No shifted the shape of my weeks. On Sundays when I went running, I no longer needed to account for another person. There was no time by which I had to return so that we could go to B’s brother and sister-in-law’s for dinner. With no thought of a predetermined end, I lengthened my runs. I lingered by the coast and looked down at the seals and their pups as they sunned themselves on the sand. I walked around families sprawled out on the Bermuda grass. Little pods and clans and ones of us all sharing the open city space, taking in the crashing waves and dragging ourselves through the Sunday afternoon.

It was then, in my late thirties—as I reveled in the freedom of filling my time with outings that appealed to me—that I finally started to wonder, no, to suspect, that there were others like me. An unraveling: Not all women who are single wish that they aren’t.

It’s easy to misread the dictionary note, which tells us that the adjectival form of single is predicative. If we drop the “a,” we’re left

believing that single has a predictive use. We predict that once she's reached a certain age, the woman will stay single. We believe that the state lost its transience and took up residence.

To use the word attributively is to link it to the noun and to attribute the quality or trait to the subject. In attributive use: The single woman went for a jog. Attributes can be a permanent part of one's identity, but like states of being, they also have metamorphic potential. Attributes that we believed were fixed—gender and race—are not as static or absolute as we once presumed.

It's not only adjectives that have attributive qualities. Some nouns contain the attribute within them: the woman, the jogger, the student, the teacher. Some attributes are temporary, some occur simultaneously. When the woman isn't jogging does she remain a jogger? How long without jogging before it becomes inaccurate to call her a jogger?

To call a woman single is to yoke her to a slippery attribute that either doesn't tell us much or that tells of countless lifestyles and identities.

Single is more bumbling than alone. Its cluster of consonants clogs the delivery. The hard "g" won't allow us to linger with it as alone does. The mouth stretches into a tight smile for single. The throat, the jaw, the lips relax for alone.

Why does single only come in the plural form in classical Latin? Is there no such thing as *a* single, only multitudes of singles? Singles are both lone and ubiquitous. So many singles.

Single is a box to check at the doctors or on a W-2. Signs for singles in different locales are posted at busy intersections, the bottom of the signs include web addresses that will take us to a place filled with others like us. *Sexy Singles of Seattle; Silver Haired Singles of Susquehanna*. Singles might not want to be single; singles might not always be single. Single is transitional. Unless. Add the qualifier ever. Ever-single. The widow is ever-married. The spinster is never-married. Or she is ever-single?

The single woman puzzles us. Revisiting that list of adjectives, "sole, unaccompanied, individual," we're reminded that we don't need a second something to give us context for the single. There's no need to add an opposite, something for her to play off of. But we add anyway; we can't help ourselves. So single is also part of a word pairing and thus takes on meaning based on what it is not and based on being one component of two. Single : coupled :: what : what?

Single is an expert hoverer. It floats above all sexual identities: bisexual, homosexual, heterosexual, asexual, pansexual, and others. It's assumed that

single tells us something of a person's sexuality, and yet it won't disclose. How confounding!

Single at Heart (adj) from the psychologist Bella Depaulo. "Among the innovators are people of all ages who are single at heart. They are not single because they have issues or because they have not yet found a partner. They are not looking. Single is who they really are."

I don't look. The sense that I am supposed to be looking mostly evaporates. When it returns it comes at me from outside with a heavy humidity. Other people wonder who my next partner will be. *You'll meet someone when you least expect it.*

I like not meeting someone.

Singularist (n) also from the Latin *singulum*. 1. One who differs from others, or from what is generally accepted; one who affects singularity.

Or: 3. an adherent or advocate of singularism:

Singularism (n): a philosophy which explains the phenomena of the universe from a single principle; as opposed to pluralism.

Moving from the "g" to the "u" to the "l" requires a lot of throat and teeth and tongue. But singularist as a possible term for who and what I am and where I fit is worthy of consideration. It doesn't contain or connote loneliness. It pushes past relationship status into the realm of philosophy and physics.

The singularist believes in the Big Bang, or as my four-year-old nephew calls it, the Big Boom. Which in fact might be more accurate. Why a bang and not a boom? A boom is deeper than a bang. A bang startles in a way that shatters what's inside the skull. A boom reverberates in the ribs, in the body. Surely if it was a bang it was also a boom, like the plosive piano chord and cymbal at the end of the Beatles' "A Day in the Life." The single woman not as invisible and unnoticed, but as a vibrating multi-instrumental swirl of sound. A principal force of creation.

In my quest to find context for the shape my life is taking, I read more and more about the single woman. As I read, the specter of the isolated spinster is eclipsed by the socially and politically engaged and sometimes public-facing non-conformists.

Sometimes a conversation with another woman ends with her pointing me toward sources that would've slipped past me. *Read the article on Mary Moody Emerson in the NEH magazine.* I do. I'd never heard of Moody Emerson, but her nephew was part of the curriculum. Now, I learn that

like me, Moody Emerson refused a proposal. Unlike me, she needed an inheritance to do so.

Mary was a prolific reader and writer in her own right. She invited Ralph Waldo, H.D. Thoreau, and the women we let fall into obscurity—Sarah Alden Bradford, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, Ann Sargent Gage, and Elizabeth Hoar—to her home to discuss Dante and Plato, Kant and Coleridge, Russian poetry and Indian Mysticism. No doubt these conversations provided some of the oxygen that fed the fire of Transcendentalism.

Of course I knew about Susan B. Anthony, but either I was never taught or didn't care at the time to learn of her single status. My schooling left out any possible link between her politics and her choice to be single. I filled in the gaps with what was available and assumed that, like the suffragettes in *Mary Poppins*, the American counterparts were wives.

In my pursuit of single women, I read about the “New Women” of the 1920s who earned their own money and questioned the institution of marriage and advocated for birth control and sex outside of marriage. This leads me to the activism and anarchist politics of Emma Goldman and Valerie Solanas. I contemplate the spectrum that exists between the two. Goldman advocated for sexual liberation, *I demand the independence of woman, her right to support herself; to live for herself; to love whomever she pleases or as many as she pleases.* Solanas saw celibacy as an avenue for unlimited possibility, *The female can easily—far more easily than she may think condition away her sex drive, leaving her completely cool and cerebral and free to pursue truly worthy relationships and activities.*

I see the dual energy of the politics and philosophies of both women. Destruction yields creation. Destruction of the established social order, destruction of the woman in the role of mother and homemaker, destruction of heteronormative sex acts within the confines of marriage. The creation of or allowance for new subjectivities. Woman as activist, woman as aggressive, woman as athlete; these are just the As.

I scour the internet looking for writing by single women about their singleness. There, in the *Guardian* online, I find the columnist Hannah Betts. Well before Emma Watson coined self-partnered to describe her single status, Betts, another Brit, looked for a language that wasn't tangled up in misogynist history and etymology, a word that would lead the way to something new. She opted for singularist.

Betts is single; she enjoys singleness. Hers is a specific classification of singleness. (Why is there such a need to classify?) Betts is a British

counterpart to the American Candace Bushnell. A certain strain of single women: white, white-collared, columnists. Both bring glamor to the single status. They are the descendants of the bachelor girl. A New Woman for the new millennium.

Betts is not alone. Betts is not celibate. She dates and participates in romantic partnership, but she prefers to live alone. She is a more introspective Candace Bushnell. Without fully developing her ideas, she nonetheless asks the reader to consider singleness as a “material and philosophical state.”

Like the Big Bang, to live outside of marriage is a force both material and philosophical. In the realm of the material, my singularism takes shape in the homes that I find and choose throughout the years. I don’t split the rent or the mortgage with a mate. I don’t qualify for a tax break. My individual income and credit score are the entryway to my standard of living. These provide me with the materials for survival—food and shelter. There’s no back and forth between me and another about which neighborhood to live in, so I choose places that I find appealing. The water is never far away. I can walk to the post office, my dentist and mechanic, a corner store.

As a philosophy, singularism in this new context—not as a way to explain the origins of the universe, but as a way to explain an existence that avoids, or dodges, or refuses partnership and/or marriage—declares that structuring our lives by a pair or a family are one of myriad ways to establish connection and contentment. Singularism questions the oddness of turning the number of people we live with and types of relationships that we participate in into something hierarchical. Nonsense and humbug to this faulty reasoning.

To be a singularist requires that a woman pauses for a moment in the trough between the waves of culture to listen to the sound of her breath and to ask if she wants a life of sharing a bed and a junk drawer and maybe kids and one another’s families and foibles and fears and work frustrations. Often it is difficult or not even possible to find this lull in the nearly endless forward motion.

I learn that Hannah Betts is one of these women, like Bushnell and Beyoncé who writes or sings with brazenness of singleness only to find her way down the aisle. Vows exchanged.

I catch myself policing women’s marital status. Thinking of them as sellouts, phonies for choosing marriage. Doing unto them what I railed

against the culture at large for doing to me; each year as I filed my taxes, each trip to a new doctor, each time I became part of a new community, a form of monitoring occurred. A box checked. A ringless finger. I did not want to be categorized by whether I was a one or two. And now I sat in judgment feeling superior to the twos. I was affixing a stable identity to singleness. I saw these pairings-off as a turning against an inclination to stay uncoupled. I was ensnared in the binary.

Of the terms I try on, I like singularist. I like that its etymology brings us back to philosophy and that its definition includes difference and not sameness. But because it is Betts who uses it most prominently, it's become entwined with a lifestyle that includes dating and partnership. So instead sole. Solo. I try out a different term.

Solo a (*adj, n*) Italian *solo* from the Latin *solūm, solūs, sole*. Sole: of things. Compare with *solūs*: alone, by one's self.

1a. *n Music.* an instance of a song, melody, or other piece of music being rendered or performed by one single player; a piece of vocal or instrumental music performed, or intended for performance, by a single person.

Solo is appealing in that it has none of the baggage of a word like spinster, nor the ambiguity that accompanies the single—no, “Is she or isn’t she looking for a relationship?”

I like the existing associations with the word. A solo is part of a larger composition yet there’s a moment when the other instruments cease playing. A soloist has the strength and complexity and beauty and artistry to venture out for a time on her own. But I start to question whether I want to identify as a solo. I am Elizabeth and I am solo. There are parts of the definition that aren’t appealing. “That is achieved or performed unaccompanied or unassisted.” It smacks of American individualism. The individual who needs no one and who, by extension, need not consider another. Han Solo? Even before Leia, he needed Chewie.

Additional definitions of solo help us to disentangle the soloist from selfishness. Instead, she is “one who flies solo.”

Solo b (*adj*) 1a. alone; without a companion or partner; *spec.* with reference to flying.

Amelia Earhart was a soloist and, beyond possessing enough skill to fly a plane on her own, much of the way that she lived her life is an example of what I find so appealing about the prospect of identifying as a soloist. Amelia broke off an engagement. She refused George Putnam’s proposal

not once but six times. The seventh time she accepted but insisted on keeping her own name. Earhart's name contains two homophones. We pronounce the first syllable of her last name not *ear* as it is spelled, but rather *air*. Air-heart.

Amelia's true love was flying. Seeing the earth from above. She worked and invested her money in order to save enough to pay for flying lessons and to buy her own plane. She sought out sponsors so that she could one day be the first woman to cross the Atlantic on a solo flight.

Solo, like all-one, strikes balance. Balance between vowels and consonants, balance of sound with its two long ōs.

In its root, another homophone. What does it mean that so many words that can be applied to people who are not romantically partnered are the aural equivalent of a sleight of hand or *trompe l'oeil*? The sole individual or the sole of the foot? Or the soul, that inexplicable feature that transcends the material. What does it mean that sonically these words are identical to other words and thus to go by sound alone without any context or without the aid of the visual letters will leave us to conjure many meanings?

We cannot tell just by looking at someone whether or not she is single or solo. How does the single woman dress or wear her hair? Do we look for a ring? Something that could, of course, be slid on or taken off.

The single person always ends up “un” something—unmarried, unwed, unaccompanied, unsupported, uncoupled, unattached. The solo is without—without a partner, without the addition of another. In each case this lifestyle, at least linguistically, suggests a lack. Clearly this won't do.

Termless (adj) 1. originally and chiefly *poetic*; having no limit in extent, duration, quantity, or degree; boundless; endless; infinite...

To be without a defining term brings fear and thrill. To walk the earth absent a classifier seems scary in that I wonder if it is possible to maintain an idea of a self without cloaking myself in words that serve to tell me who I am. With no identifying terms would I dissolve into my surroundings, turn into some monochrome and flat life form?

The buzz that attends termlessness comes from the notion that one can be and exist in a boundless and infinite state; ever stretching and expanding outward and defying the edge that tries to circumscribe.

For years I've believed that the goal of my meditations on a life outside of romantic partnership was to strike linguistic gold. I would coin a term that would encapsulate this state of being that couldn't be reduced to a sexual identity or marked by connotations of loneliness and dissatisfaction.

But to devise such a term is also to limit. So there's an appeal to being termless, endless, infinite.

Of course, it isn't possible to fully conceive of the infinite. We turn to minutes, months, and millennia in an attempt to corral and comprehend time. It's more difficult to fool ourselves about our power to limit when we look up to the night sky. In these moments our bid at quantifying time and space dissolves into something paltry.

Termless, then, resides in the poetic because there's no way for our words to work in a literal or material sense when it comes to expressing that which has no limit in extent, duration, quantity, or degree. We do better to turn to figures of speech, analogies, metaphors.

Not all of my recent musing and reading centers on aloneness or the single woman. In one book I read that definitions are like islands. A shore, a point at which something ends and another begins is necessary for thought, for concepts, to exist—land and sea, skin and air, earth and sky, life and death. But, the writer reminds us, *the meanings of most words often seem to dissipate around the edges.*¹

It's easy to miss the blur at the edge. We've become accustomed to boundaries. Often they are useful; other times they give us a false sense of the absolute. We look for them and stop when we bump up against them.

What choices have I made or not made based on identifying as a single woman? And where has this definition failed to provide any real meaning?

The trick is to follow our gaze or our gut beyond definitions and measurement. Beyond the order of the alphabetical list. Beyond the pattern we use to comprehend a life. We are born; we go to school and make friends; we are drawn to certain pastimes and hobbies; we move away from home; we find jobs that we love or that will provide economic support; fall in love; marry, start a family; die. And/or we trace and forge multiple lines that splay out in every direction like rays of light. Boundless. A life of friends and pets, kitchens and movie theaters, mentors and neighbors, road trips and back yards, cousins and siblings, libraries and ocean piers, boulders and breezes.

¹ Marc Shell, *Islandology: Geography, Rhetoric, Politics*. (Stanford University Press, 2014.)